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Recommended Citation

Coe, C. (2020, May). *The impact of current U.S. immigration policies on individuals with disabilities and their families* (PDF). Poster presented at the NH-ME LEND Capstone Poster Session and Celebration [Zoom web conference].

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The Impact of Current U.S. Immigration Policies on Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families

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What is the Public Charge rule?

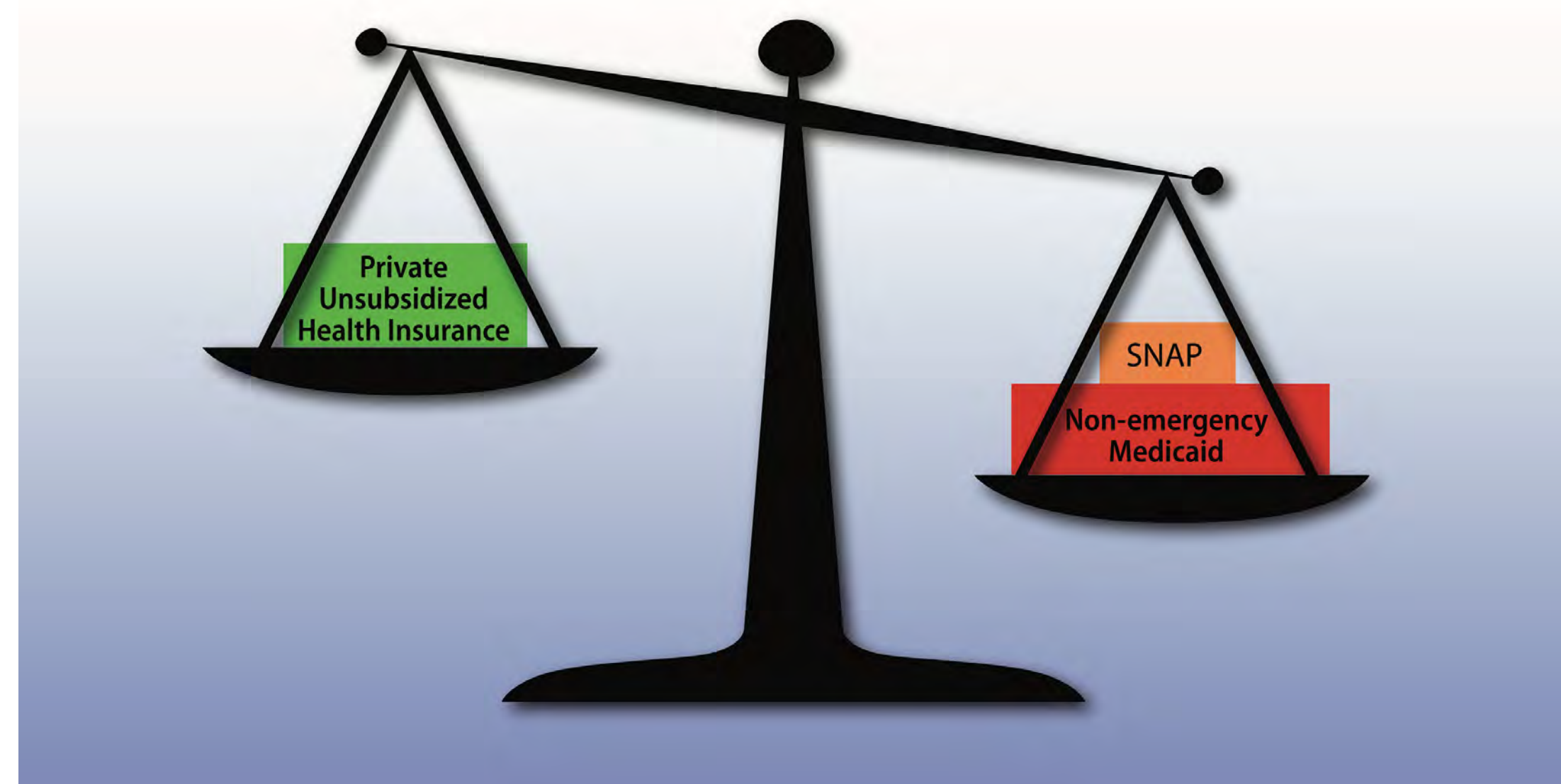
The Public Charge rule expands the definition used by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' officials of who is a "public charge." U.S. officials look at a "totality of circumstances" to project whether a person will receive "one or more public benefits for more than 12 months in the aggregate within any 36-month period."⁽¹⁾ Implemented on Feb. 24, 2020, the rule can be used to deny admission to the United States, or application for a green card, to individuals who have used, or may likely apply for non-emergency Medicaid, Medicare Part D Low Income Subsidy, housing assistance, and food assistance (SNAP).

As **Medicaid** is the primary provider of community services and supports to help individuals with disabilities to live and work in community, the rule negatively impacts individuals with disabilities and their families.

Some Factors in the Totality of Circumstances Test

Heavily Weighed Positive Factor

Heavily Weighed Negative Factor



"Assigning a heavy negative weight to applicants with disabilities [who seek to enter the U.S. or to become U.S. citizens] will codify discriminatory assumptions and perpetuate a negative view of the abilities of all people with disabilities."⁽²⁾ –letter from Neil Romano, Chairman of the National Council on Disability, to the Dept. of Homeland Security, Dec. 10, 2018.

Status as of April 16, 2020: Court cases have been filed in 21 states and the District of Columbia to contest the rule. Still in litigation. Testing and treatment of COVID-19, even if paid for by Medicaid, will not count against green card applicants, but they must document any need for food and housing assistance related to the pandemic.

Impacts:

1. Toxic stress: Confusion about who will be impacted by rule and anti-immigrant rhetoric sows fear.
2. "Chilling effect": People opt out of programs they legally qualify for out of concern for their ability to stay in the U.S. and get a green card.⁽³⁾
3. Risk of exacerbating direct support professional (DSP) workforce crisis. About ¼ of DSPs are immigrants who may leave these low-paid jobs to avoid the need for public benefits, thus impacting the ability of individuals with disabilities to remain in their homes.⁽⁴⁾

The Public Charge rule and the Remain in Mexico policy negatively impact individuals with disabilities and make it harder for legal immigration to the U.S. for low- and middle-income people. The Public Charge rule does not affect asylum seekers, but the Remain in Mexico policy results in a loss of protections for this population.



What is "Remain in Mexico"?

Implemented on January 28, 2019, "Remain in Mexico," officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), forces asylum seekers who arrive at a port of entry on the U.S. southern border to be sent back to Mexico to await their asylum proceedings. This includes children with disabilities, pregnant women, and LGBTQ+ individuals. With hearings perhaps months or a year away, asylum seekers wait in Mexican border cities too unsafe for U.S. travelers to visit, according to the U.S. State Department.⁽⁵⁾

According to MPP, "[I]ndividuals from vulnerable populations may be excluded on a case-by-case basis" from the policy,⁽⁷⁾ yet U.S. border agents have continued to force those with disabilities and other vulnerable individuals back to Mexico. The asylum seekers are largely in tents and shelters without access to safe social distancing to protect against transmission of COVID-19.

1000+ public reports of rape, kidnapping, torture, and other violent crimes against asylum seekers returned under MPP, as of Feb. 28, 2020.⁽⁶⁾



Photo Open-air encampment of asylum seekers awaiting hearings, Matamoros, Mexico. ©Mellisa Pratcht, 2019, Doctors without Borders

Status as of April 16, 2020: On Feb. 28, 2020, a three-judge panel from the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit temporarily halted MPP for those awaiting hearings in California and Arizona. The U.S. Supreme Court has been asked to consider the case. On March 20, 2020, the Trump Administration closed the southern border to asylum seekers.

Impacts:

1. Individuals fleeing violence and seeking protections in the U.S. are denied an effective opportunity to seek asylum. They are returned to areas where they are at risk of great harm.
2. Public health measures work only when they include everyone. Asylum seekers, including those with disabilities, are being left out, undermining other novel coronavirus containment measures.
3. In Mexican border cities, asylum seekers with disabilities and chronic health conditions lack accessible bathrooms, transportation, or food that meets their special dietary needs. Due process protections are not guaranteed.⁽⁸⁾

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